

## Andres Iniesta launches academy in Dubai



Manama

Spain and FC Barcelona midfielder genius Andres Iniesta has tied up with local partner Abdulrahman Almeqbali in cooperation with the Dubai Sports Council (DSC) to launch his ambitious Iniesta Academy in the UAE. This was announced at a press conference held at the Marriott Hotel Al Jaddaf, Dubai.

The press conference was attended by H.E. Saeed Hareb, Secretary General of the Dubai Sports Council, along with a number of distinguished personalities and sports stars.

For the Spanish midfielder wizard, this could be among the smoothest of transitions from an active playing career in football into coaching with the starting of this academy bearing his name.

Iniesta has already committed himself to set to commence his next chapter in football – this time as Head Coach of Dubai-based UAE First Division team, Gulf United FC. Having

obtained his 'A' Licence, the World Cup winner and Champions League-decorated midfielder will continue to progress towards his Pro Licence.

The highly-talented Iniesta officially retired from professional football after a glittering 22-year career, on October 8, 2024, concluding his playing days in the UAE Pro League with Emirates Club. He symbolically chose October 8 to make the announcement, as a fitting tribute to his iconic No. 8 jersey.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest midfielders of all time, Iniesta was lauded for his balance, ball control and agility in close spaces, combined with his skill, composure and flair on the ball. Iniesta can today boast of an amazing 38 major trophies during his career, including 32 honours with FC Barcelona – nine La Liga crowns and four UEFA Champions League – along with another three with Japanese side Vissel Kobe and the Spanish national team.

## 'I'll be at next World Cup' in 2030: Somali referee barred from US

AFP | Mogadishu

Somali referee Omar Artan, who was denied entry to the United States for the World Cup, returned to a hero's welcome in Mogadishu and vowed to take part in the next tournament in 2030.

More than 100 supporters lined up outside the VIP section of Mogadishu's main airport, waving national flags as Artan disembarked from a Turkish Airlines flight to cheers.

"I will be at the next World Cup and will continue to make Somalia proud... Despite what has happened to me, I am not discouraged," Artan told journalists.

Artan's rejection has sparked outrage at home.

"They wronged him in a way that hurts everybody that is



Somalian referee Omar Artan in action

concerned about humanity," Mohamed Said, a Mogadishu government official, said at the airport.

Artan, who in 2025 was named men's referee of the year by the Confederation of African Football (CAF), was barred from

entering the US on Saturday after arriving at Miami International Airport.

A US State Department official told AFP late Tuesday that the referee was "associated with suspected members of terrorist organizations", therefore "making the traveler ineligible for admission to the United States".

FIFA also confirmed that he would no longer be part of the World Cup set to start on Thursday.

Artan's appointment to the 52-strong roster of referees for the finals in Canada, Mexico and the United States had been a huge source of pride for his compatriots.

Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud said in April he was "a symbol of inspiration for the new generation of Somalis".

## Gascoigne urges England to replicate 1990 spirit at World Cup

AFP | London

Paul Gascoigne said yesterday he hopes England can reproduce the same "unbelievable" team spirit as the squad at the 1990 World Cup during their quest for glory at this year's tournament.

The former midfielder was a key member of Bobby Robson's team which reached the semi-finals in Italy before losing on penalties to eventual champions West Germany.

England have won the World Cup just once, on home soil 60

years ago, and the only time they have reached the semi-finals since 1990 was when Gareth Southgate's side made it through to the last four in 2018.

"You want 11 captains on the pitch and when you are playing in a game like that, at a World Cup, you cannot afford to carry anyone," Gascoigne told ITV.

"Everyone has to be on the ball and the team spirit is important.

"The players that didn't play, they were right behind the team, so our team spirit was unbelievable."



Paul Gascoigne

"The most important thing is team spirit because that goes a long way."

Thomas Tuchel's men face Costa Rica in their final friendly yesterday before a Group L opener against Croatia in Dallas on June 17.

When asked what he would say to the current squad, the 59-year-old Gascoigne added: "Enjoy it. Because you just never know it could be your last World Cup."

Gascoigne famously burst into tears after being booked in the 1990 semi-final meaning he would have been suspended from the final had England qualified.

# Nicholas Hwende's next move: five possible paths for BRAVE CF'S two-division king

TDT | Manama

Nearly two weeks ago, Nicholas "The Saint" Hwende authored another defining chapter into BRAVE Combat Federation history.

At BRAVE CF 105 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, last May 31, the Zimbabwean standout submitted interim titleholder Omar "Cobra" Solomanov in the fifth round to become the undisputed BRAVE CF Featherweight World Champion.

With that triumph, Hwende joined an exclusive class of athletes who have captured World Titles in two different divisions under the promotion's banner.

For many athletes, such an achievement would represent the peak of their career. But for Hwende, it appears to signal the beginning of an even more ambitious stretch.

The former bantamweight ruler has looked revitalized since his move to featherweight, consistently highlighting the advantages of competing without the punishing weight cuts that once defined his earlier run.

Now fully settled at 145 pounds, "The Saint" stands at a crossroads filled with opportunity.

From legacy-defining defenses and renewed rivalries to su-

per-fights and even a bold leap into uncharted territory, the possibilities are vast.

As BRAVE CF 105 fades into history, attention turns toward what comes next for one of Africa's most accomplished mixed martial artists.

### Rauan Bekbolat

Rauan "Shymyr" Bekbolat has quietly built one of the strongest cases for a World Title opportunity in the featherweight division.

The No. 2-ranked bantamweight contender entered BRAVE CF 105 with a point to prove, and he did emphatically by submitting Sardor "Tiger" Khudoyberdiev with a first-round triangle choke in front of his home supporters.

The timing was impossible to ignore. Moments after Nicholas Hwende's coronation, the two men met inside the BRAVE CF cage, instantly fueling speculation about a collision course for the divisional crown.

### Omar Solomanov

Rivalries rarely conclude with a single encounter, and the story between Nicholas Hwende and Omar Solomanov already carries the weight of unfinished business.



Solomanov came to BRAVE CF 105 as the BRAVE CF Interim Featherweight World Champion, having previously defeated Rauan Bekbolat at BRAVE CF 98 in September 2025 to earn the right to vie for undisputed supremacy.

The Ukrainian brought momentum, confidence, and a growing reputation as one of the division's most complete fighters. However, Hwende crashed the party and claimed the intricately crafted hardware.

Despite the setback, Solomanov's standing in the weight class ensures he remains a con-

stant presence near the top. Another strong performance from him could easily reopen the door to a sequel, especially in a division where elite challengers are never far from contention.

### Nemat Abdrashitov

Few potential matchups carry as much intrigue as a showdown between Nicholas Hwende and former BRAVE CF Featherweight World Champion Nemat "Eagle" Abdrashitov.

The Kyrgyz dynamo captured the coveted strap at BRAVE CF 72 in June 2023 and established himself as one of the division's

most influential figures.

Although he no longer occupies the throne, Abdrashitov never lost it inside the cage, a detail that continues to shape how his legacy is viewed.

Hwende now sits atop the division, but a clash with the last reigning champion would offer clarity to a lingering debate about lineage and supremacy.

### Borislav Nikolic

Every championship journey carries a defining setback, and for Nicholas Hwende, that moment came against Borislav "Zombee" Nikolic.

At BRAVE CF 96 in June 2025, the Serbian shocked the world by submitting Hwende with a fourth-round ninja choke to claim the BRAVE CF Bantamweight World Championship.

The defeat ended Hwende's reign at 135 pounds and remains one of the most significant victories of Nikolic's career.

Since then, Hwende has rebuilt himself into a two-division World Champion, while Nikolic continues his own run as the bantamweight king.

The history between them remains unresolved, with their initial duel still standing as a pivotal turning point in Hwende's evolution.

### Lightweight

Perhaps the most ambitious path available to Nicholas Hwende lies one division above.

Immediately after capturing undisputed featherweight gold, the Zimbabwean hinted at the possibility of moving to lightweight, a suggestion that quickly captured attention across the BRAVE CF landscape.

While it may have been delivered with a hint of humor, the idea carries serious historical implications.

Hwende has already become only the second fighter in BRAVE CF history to win World Titles in two separate weight classes.

A successful move to 155 pounds would place him on the brink of an unprecedented achievement – the possibility of becoming the first three-division BRAVE CF World Champion.

The lightweight division presents a daunting challenge, led by divisional king Abdissalam "Omok" Kubanychbek and interim titlist Rauli Tutarauli, alongside a deep roster that includes Ramazan Gitinov and Owais Yaqoobi.

Yet that level of difficulty may be precisely what attracts a fighter whose career has been defined by constant elevation beyond expectations.